

SELINA MAE

# LESSONS IN FORGIVING

English edition

Hall Beck University 2



DE FONTEIN

*To those who love hard and fast and never really stop.  
Thank you.*

*(P.S.: Do not get back with your ex. They're not fictional,  
and you deserve so much better.)*

# CHAPTER 1



*THEN, August: three years and seven months ago*

For the past eighteen years of my life, I'd learned to become an expert at reading my parents like an open book. Predicting their whims, knowing when to ask for something and when to keep my mouth shut—when to push a topic and when to drop it.

Right now, I could tell they regretted this.

From the way María Castillo's brows pinched together, and the concerned tilt of Juan Castillo's lower lip, I could tell. My parents were seconds away from dragging me onto that plane, back to the scorching, familiar Caribbean heat.

They'd lasted a whole two days longer than I'd given them credit for.

"It's... big." Trying to fit into the English-speaking environment, Mom's accent was thick. She gaped up at the high ceilings, eyes raking over the rising rows of seats in the lecture hall. With one last lingering look at the families around us, she turned to me.

*Oh yeah.* Big-time concern was written all over María's face.

“Don’t worry, mami.”

I tried not to freak out at the prospect of *her* freaking out, so I waved her off, pretended like I didn’t wholeheartedly agree with her. Which made me feel stiff. Robotic.

Dad mirrored the sentiment. “Mi vida,” he muttered, trying to swallow his own worries. His hand rested in the small of her back, nudging her out into the hallway. When his eyes flitted in my direction, one thing was clear.

We were on the same page.

And he was desperate to get Mom there, too; tried to convince her of how sure he was I’d find my place here. “Estoy seguro de que nuestra Paulita se integrará—”

But Mom’s head shot in his direction so fast, he swallowed his Spanish before she’d even said anything. Her withering glare probably helped.

“Coño, Juan. Por favor. *English!*” With one glance down the hallway, she made sure no one had heard the accidental Spanish slip.

Not that anyone cared as much as she did.

But if there was one thing María couldn’t stand, it was sticking out. If there was another, it would probably be not knowing what her only daughter was doing at any given moment.

So, the prospect of leaving me in a foreign country, where I’d most likely *not* fit in had clearly been more appealing on paper. Proudly telling cousins, aunts and uncles that her daughter was going to study in America until they’d started avoiding her on the streets, had been fun—but she did not seem to be a fan of the reality it had become.

Her brows furrowed, she chewed on her red-painted bottom lip, and I had about two seconds to convince her that this is where I’m supposed to be.

At Hall Beck University. In the United States. About 1,600 miles from the Dominican Republic. *Home*.

Harder than it sounded when I wasn't fully convinced of it myself yet.

"Look," I began, tentatively nudging her into one of the smaller rooms we'd passed on the orientation tour. Gone were the rising rows of chairs and the intimidating podium where professors held hour-long lectures. Entering a simple classroom that would hopefully shake my parents out of their shock-like state, my shoulders sagged with a little bit of relief. "It's not so different from Universidad Tecnológica de Santiago."

Which was where I'd probably end up if I didn't sway this situation in my favor. Fast.

Mom shook her head, a disapproving *tsk* passing through her teeth. "Don't lie, Paulita," she huffed. Looking at the wall of windows, the whiteboard and the tablet on each seat, she was probably right when she said, "This is nothing like it." She sighed. "I... don't know. Maybe you should come back with us after all. What do you think, Juan?"

Panic. It zipped through my body, white and hot, at the questioning look she directed at Dad. For the life of me I could not remember a single instance in which Juan Castillo had denied my mother a single thing. And sharing a glance with the man who had advocated for my degree in the States so hard, it did not seem like he was about to start now.

I could see him slip. He was probably already calculating the cost of an extra ticket back to Puerto Plata tomorrow.

"No!" My intervention kept him from so much as a nod that would set their decision in stone. "Why? Think of how good this school will look on my CV! You've already told Aunt..."

all of the aunts about it. And the cousins! Can't forget about the cousins." All twenty-three of them. "What would they think—?"

But her head continued shaking, and I was losing momentum here. "No." Her eyes drifted to me again. "I don't care about that." *Lie*. "We just want what's best for you, Paula. I don't know if that's here. I mean... have you... adjusted?" Concern found its way back into her brown eyes. "Have you made any friends yet?"

I was not surprised by the fact Mom's only worry was how well I'd fit in—how popular I'd be.

And I did not feel guilty about the lie that flew out of my mouth, either.

"Yes!" *I had not*. "Of course." Hadn't even met my roommates yet. "Is that what you're worried about, mami?"

"No."

Yes. Yes. Yes! She was lying, too, and I could work with that.

"Oh," I swooned, slowly guiding my parents away from the spot in which they'd almost made a decision that would've jeopardized my entire future. Just in case it would remind them of it. "I've met amazing people. They're all so... chatty here!"

"Americans do love to talk." Dad agreed gruffly. "Loudly, too."

"Really?" Not quite sure whether she'd asked me or Dad to elaborate, I took over. Finally, there was a glimmer of hope. Light at the end of the tunnel. María Castillo looked relieved, and I could build on that.

If all I needed to fake was an outstanding social life for the next four years, I'd call that a win.

"*Really*," I assured them, throwing all the conviction I could

into my gaze. It stayed on them, even when we continued making our way out of the room. “We spent all day together yesterday,” I lied as I walked backward. “And—”

I couldn’t build on my lie when I backed into a solid... something. Then, startled, felt myself slip.

I prepared to hit the floor face first. Or maybe the back of my head would make contact instead? Either way, my parents would realize I wasn’t fit to take care of myself (because I’d landed myself in the hospital with a head injury two days into my independence journey) and I’d be forced to agree with them because... well, I did land myself in the hospital. Mentally, I was already back in the Dominican Republic before I’d even made it to the ground.

I never did.

Instead, I felt a cool hand curl around my wrist, yanking me upright and keeping me there until I managed to find my footing.

I did not faceplant, only stumbled into Dad’s chest when the stranger’s grip around me loosened. And instead of my parents realizing I was in no condition to take care of myself, I heard an ironic, “Eyes up. Or you might hurt someone.”

Followed by Mom’s curious voice. “Do you two know each other?” She sounded... excited, and suddenly I did not care who I’d just run into. They would have to do.

I turned just in time to silence him with a look, his lips already parted to give the obvious answer: No.

“Yes!” I blurted, ignoring the confused furrowing of his dark brows. Ignoring how beautifully they contrasted his green eyes more. Wincing, I mouthed a *Please*. Then added a *Sorry*.

I swallowed thickly before turning to my parents, taking a step back to stand beside the brunette stranger, his hair a few

shades lighter than my own brown curls. “Of course!” I doubled down, cheerily. Too cheerily? “This is...”

With the way he winced, I might’ve *gently* nudged my elbow into his side a little too forcefully. But it must’ve done the trick, conveyed my desperation accurately, because he straightened beside me and extended his hand.

“Henry Pressley. Pleasure to finally meet you.” His eyes only flicked in my direction for a second before he went on. “I’ve heard so much about you.”

*How much could I have potentially told him in the two days we’re supposed to have known each other?*

I was surprised to hear Dad speak first.

“Pressley?” He repeated the name under his breath, barely loud enough for me to pick up his next words either. Like they weren’t intended for the audience he had. “¿Dónde fue que escuché ese nombre?”

Instead of answering where Dad could’ve heard the name before, Mom lovingly rammed her elbow into his ribs at the second Spanish slip of the day.

“Henry!” she cheered a little louder, smile forced, and eyes glued to the boy. Probably to distract from Dad’s Spanish *and* to compensate for his whispering. “No wonder Paula talked so much about you.”

I hadn’t, obviously. And in any other circumstance, I might’ve been embarrassed by the—although false—revelation. But the fact Henry’s appearance had made her forget that I hadn’t mentioned anyone until two minutes ago was worth the little color in my cheeks.

“Has she?” His eyes slid to me again before he huffed, the sound low and kind of pleased, then looked back at my parents. “Only good things, I hope.”



“Of course.” Mom waved him off, again forgetting I hadn’t talked about him before at all. She seemed too blinded by the possibility of her daughter actually making a friend. Like she couldn’t believe it.

Awesome.

“Pressley!” Dad blurted, completely out of nowhere, only realizing he hadn’t used his inside-voice when his head snapped up. His eyes widened. “Triste—no! Sorry! Sorry.”

I wasn’t sure if he was apologizing to Henry for the outburst or to Mom for the Spanish. His gaze darted between the two so quickly, I couldn’t be sure. At last, they settled on the stranger, and, a little calmer, though still rattled, he said, “You’re Felix Pressley’s son. The soccer player.”

The shadow that moved across Henry’s face was gone as quickly as it had appeared. Like it was nothing, he put on a smile that didn’t quite reach his eyes and said, “That’s right, sir.”

I smiled, too, because I knew Dad’s favorite thing about Americans was that they regularly called him sir.

“You a fan?” Henry asked.

And I’d never had a particular problem with my family’s bluntness, but when Juan Castillo shook his head and went on to say “Not really”—language barrier or not—I wished they had a filter for moments like these. The smile on my face fell.

I expected the same reaction from Henry. But instead of offended gasps, insults thrown, and my little lie revealed, his smile seemed to be genuine. “Yeah.” He snickered, sounding relieved more than anything. “Me neither.”

And then they bonded.

For a solid fifteen minutes, it was obvious to anyone in our vicinity that my dad knew the guy beside me—or his father,

for that matter—better than I did. But as long as Mom had a smile on her face, seemed delighted by the conversation and wasn't catching on to my lie, I was happy.

When my parents finally headed outside, the idea to take me back home with them seemingly all forgotten about, my sigh was so loud, it carried through the corridor. "You might've just accidentally saved my ass, *Henry*."

"Well, *Paula*." I could hear the grin in his voice. I didn't have to look at him, and in fact, my eyes were still glued to the double doors that just closed behind my parents. "Always happy to help a friend out when she's..." He trailed off, hoping I'd fill in the blanks. "When she's what, actually?"

"Oh, you know." I waved him off halfheartedly, my own smile audible. "Just trying to convince her parents she has a raging social life two days into college, before they change their mind and make her go to school back home." I realized then that I was speaking about myself in third person, which was probably weird. Weirder than my explanation.

So, I cleared my throat, finally glanced his way, and gave a sheepish shrug when our eyes connected. "No biggie."

"Of course." The amusement in his voice made me hopeful that speaking about myself in third person hadn't been as off-putting as I'd feared. "Should've guessed that one myself, actually. My bad."

To really look at him, my head craned upward. He'd tamed his light brown hair in a casual-enough middle part, white T-shirt tugged into tailored pants and fitting snugly around his biceps. I blinked once.

I'll be damned. Just my luck; Henry Pressley is irrefutably and undeniably... hot. Mind-blowingly gorgeous.

And I'd just spoken about myself in the third person to him.

When my eyes snapped back up to his dark green ones, he raised an eyebrow comically. “For what it’s worth,” he mused. “I think my performance might’ve changed their minds.” He nodded in the direction of their departure, though his gaze stayed fixed to mine. “Hope I’ll see you around?”

And I had a feeling I would.

“Here’s to hoping.”



## CHAPTER 2



*NOW*

Two things occurred to me at once.

1. I was chasing my editor out of the building—something I definitely shouldn't be doing.
2. I should, however, really work on my cardio.

“Ed, please!” Between labored breaths, it was all I got out, hoping I'd catch up to the man responsible for my entire future career before he would make it out of the building. “You know I need this,” I added. “More than all of them. You know I do.”

Instead of looking back at me, realizing I was right (and giving me the damn article), Eddie just shook his head. Continued his way down the stairs like he wasn't crushing a piece of my would-be career with every step.

When he started taking two at a time, he muttered, “I'm sorry, Paula.” Half-heartedly, more focused on shoving the large wooden door open to escape into sunny freedom. “Really—”

Which was when I'd fully intentionally jumped the last four steps to throw myself in front of him. I only winced slightly

when he bulldozed into me, and we almost went down on the stony ground in front of the building.

“Jesus Christ.” Eddie dusted off his beige sweater once he caught his footing. “Really?” He shook his head in so much disbelief, his blond hair flopped left and right. When his eyes leveled with mine again, and all I could do was blink at him, he took a deep breath. “Look, I know you want this story,” he said, unsure what to do with his hands—if he should comfortingly pat my shoulder or keep them swinging at his sides or scratch his head. He decided on the latter. “But I can’t give it to you. It’s too important, and after everything that happened last year—”

I could not hear about my failures again, so I quickly cut him off.

“Eddie.” A hesitant laugh. “Ed. Look. You don’t understand.” I swallowed thickly. “I need this article to graduate! *Any* article!”

I couldn’t possibly hand in one of the stray horoscopes he’d made me write as the only assignment that I still needed to graduate in a few months. That extra-curricular project was worth twenty-five percent of my final grade, and it would’ve been easy enough a year ago—when I was still getting article after article, and I hadn’t yet tarnished my journalistic reputation with one stupid mistake. But alas, it wasn’t last year anymore, and the piece of writing had to be from the current semester.

Unfortunately, in the last year Eddie had given me exactly three articles to write. All about what each star sign could expect that month. Absolutely nothing I could submit to be graded.

If they were to test my ability to go on coffee runs or make exceptional copies, though, I’d pass with flying colors.

“Eddie—” I tried again, which seemed to have been his last straw. He snapped.

“You don’t deserve it!”

While regret immediately seeped into his features, it didn’t really matter. I could tell he hadn’t meant to raise his voice, but his harsh tone hung between us now.

Eddie shook his head again. “I’m sorry, Paula. Really. After everything that’s happened, I just can’t give this one to you. It’s going to Lacy, as discussed.”

I think I might’ve flinched at the insinuation, his harsh words and that all-too-familiar name, before I shook myself out of it. “You’re not giving any of them to me, though. None. Nada. Niente. How am I supposed to graduate if you keep every viable topic to write about away from me?”

Ed pinched the bridge of his nose, eyes closing. When he looked back at me, the trace of regret in his expression was gone, and he looked like a man who had made up his mind. Somehow, I knew it wasn’t in my favor.

“Don’t worry about that, okay? I’ll get you something soon. Just not this one, Paula.”

It’s the same excuse I’d heard a million times, but it didn’t sting any less. With graduation fast approaching, I wasn’t quite sure how much longer he could leave me hanging.

Eddie went back through the massive hardwood doors of the building that held the *Hall Beck Post’s* offices. Which brought me back to realization number one.

*I just chased my editor out of the building.*

I groaned so loudly, he could’ve probably still heard it in his office a floor above. Because just like that, on a beautiful Friday afternoon, my career died. Again. Over before it even began. I hadn’t even made it out of the college paper!

If I couldn't make it at the *HBP*, how was I supposed to succeed in the real world? Between real journalists? What was I supposed to say in job interviews when they'd inevitably ask about the huge gap of publications in my writing-resume?

*Oh, that's just Eddie's fault. He rightfully wouldn't give me anything good for a year because I messed up. Really, really badly. He just didn't trust me anymore, but don't worry about it!*

My hands curled into fists at my sides before crossing on top of my head, and I halfheartedly started moving again. I took a deep breath, squeezed my eyes shut.

I'd run back and forth between this building and my place for deadlines and forgotten lunches so many times, I could walk it blindly. And I didn't care half as much about how high the risk of running into a lamppost was.

I had bigger things to worry about.

Next week, I'd talk to Eddie again. Explain the situation, make my desperation clear...*er*. Although he'd essentially benched me for an entire year, as the *Hall Beck Post's* head editor, he was obligated to give me...something for that extracurricular project. And I wanted it soon, before deadlines might be too tight to—

“Eyes up.”

The familiar voice made the blood in my veins run cold. I froze, hoping and praying I might've misheard, but—“Or you might hurt someone.”

Undeniably, that was Henry Parker Pressley's voice, coming from the direction I was heading in blindly.

My stomach lurched in recognition, and I missed one of my steps. So badly, I almost face-planted on the pebbled road. Right in front of my ex-boyfriend.

I caught my footing just in time to see our paths cross and



for my cheeks to take on an embarrassing color I hoped he didn't spot. Mortified—that being me—we passed each other, and he didn't turn to look at me again. No smile. No *hi, how have you been? I miss you, Paula*.

Just the teasing tone in his voice like we hadn't not spoken in almost a year. My stomach turned at the rich lull in his voice, like we'd never broken up at all.

It took everything in me not to groan a second time.

*Pull yourself together, estúpida.*

I'd made it an entire year without running into him on campus. Without talking to him at all. My best friend had taken our *No Contact* very seriously. And out of all the places, the Fine Arts and Communication building was the last place I'd expected that streak to end. However childish it sounded, this was *my* little corner of campus. He could have the rest if he wanted to.

The business school. The Athletic Center named after his dad. The library and cafeteria if needed. Just not the *Hall Beck Post*—or the building its office was in.

*What was he doing here?*

Every fiber of my being knew I shouldn't turn around. Screamed and fought against the urge, and I still did it anyway.

Henry stood in front of the same building I'd run out of minutes ago, seemingly contemplating the same question (“What am I doing here?”). He threw his head back, hands disappearing in brown hair that looked lighter now that the sun danced through it.

When he shook himself, that had been my cue to leave, right? *Before* he could spot me still looking at him. I shouldn't be doing that either, and it became much more apparent when he turned, our gazes met across a two-hundred-foot distance,

and it was too late to seem cool and disinterested. Suddenly, I wanted to scream *Please take me back!* across the courtyard.

I'm totally over him, by the way.

I kept repeating that to myself. When I turned on the spot and made a run for it. When I tried not to interpret the way my chest still felt tight in his presence.

*I'm totally over him.*

*Dios mío*, I could hear Maeve's words before I'd even made it home.

*Paula, get yourself together. It's been a year. Then, We said no contact for a reason, darling. That includes not longingly staring after him when you happen to pass him on campus.*

My best friend and I lived together—had been sharing our house with two other girls (and my cat) since our first year, which had made for the cheapest accommodation at the time. When I got there, Maeve took up the entire sofa, red hair spilling across the cushions while Laila and Riley lounged on the floor in front of it. Pip snuggled between the two, sleeping peacefully, for once.

Behind them, the counter separating living room and kitchen must've just been cleaned by one of the girls—probably Laila—because it was empty, save for an equally empty wooden fruit basket.

I hadn't even opened my mouth, barely managed to slip out of my sneakers and oversized leather jacket when Maeve's eyes jumped in my direction. One look, and she held up her hand, effectively shushing me.

Reminder: I hadn't said anything yet.

"I can tell you have something to share," she said quickly. Her eyes drifted back to the TV. "But not now, P. The girls are about to come back from Casa Amor!"

With a snort, I wiggled my way through the girls on the floor, and Maeve was so engrossed in *Love Island*, she didn't even complain when I hurled myself onto the small, teal-colored couch and forced her to scoot over. One of the pink throw blankets fell off the armrest it had been hanging on for dear life, and the *whoosh*-sound was enough to make Maeve *Sh!* in its direction. Like somehow the fall had been my fault.

The inevitable cliffhanger came a mere three minutes later, Maeve and Riley groaned loudly enough to fill the entire house with the sound, and Laila simply threw her head against the couch behind her, blonde hair almost tangling with my socked feet.

"Alright." Maeve finally sat up to scan me intently. "I sense reluctance from this side of the couch." She gestured at me with a laugh, drawing Riley and Laila out of their cliffhanger-conversation.

Surely, they'd be my best shot for back up here.

Maeve, with a knowing smile, said, "What don't you want to tell us but will, anyway?"

My eyes narrowed at her brown ones. "How do you know?"

"My psychic abilities." Her lips curled deeper. "And the fact you wouldn't have shut up when I told you to otherwise."

One thing about Maeve Peterson: Her assessments were always scarily accurate, bordering on actual precognition. More than a few times, I had wiped my thoughts clean just in case she really *could* read minds.

"Alright," I said. "You're not... wrong. About the reluctance."

"Shocker," Riley snickered. Laila nudged her with a shush, smoothing a hand down her pin straight hair, the way she always did when too many people suddenly focused on her.

I cleared my throat. “Remember how I’m really bad at making decisions?” The one time I’d made one, it had literally changed the trajectory of my entire life, and I’d been lying to my parents ever since.

Maeve nodded. “Hard to forget, love.”

“So, you help me decide which clothes to buy, what movies to watch. Which... exes not to call.” And there was only one ex I could be referring to.

Alarm spread through my best friend’s features like wildfire. Riley dramatically gasped from the floor, only to underline the situation with some sort of humor—not because she was actually shocked. “I didn’t call anyone!” I clarified quickly.

Maeve blinked at me, less amused than she was a minute ago. “Spit it out, Castillo.”

“Well.” I swallowed, eyes trailing across our living room to avoid her hard gaze. The TV beside the front door showed a freeze frame of the *Love Island* intro, our coffee table held few coffee table books, but instead, was covered by magazines, newspapers and three of the novels Riley rotated between. An empty glass vase stood on the sideboard to our left, and on the framed print behind it were our house rules written in a primary blue.

1. Shoes off!
2. Laugh loudly
3. Cry freely
4. Dance badly

All in all, not much to see—not more than usual, anyway. “I was just leaving the paper, talking to Eddie about... my next article—”

“Oh!” Laila squeaked from the floor. “He finally assigned you something that isn’t a horoscope?”

And bless her, I knew she did not mean for it to sound as... sad as it did. When I deadpanned a “No” her face fell.

I wasn’t sure which I hated more: the pity or the disappointment. “Not yet,” I corrected before getting back to the point. “Anyway, so as we part in... mutual ways, you’ll never guess who I ran into.”

“Ran into?” Riley again.

“*Almost* ran into,” I amended.

Maeve, of course, sighed theatrically before I even mentioned a name.

“Oh, Paula,” she muttered. “You talked to him, didn’t you?” Another sigh. “Remember that No Contact rule? Talking most definitely falls under contact—”

“I did not talk to him, thank you very much.” The prolonged silence, and my friends’ expectant looks, forced me to elaborate. “...Just looked at him. For a little too long. Until he looked back at me, and we kind of had this eye-contact thing going on, but he was so far—”

I was trailing off, and Maeve’s grimace told me I sounded too excited. So, I cut myself off. “Until *I* looked away first and bolted.” My best friend threw her head back, letting it fall against the back of the couch and shaking it with yet another sigh on her pink lips.

“Jesus Christ, Paula,” she huffed, hands running across her face. Riley and Laila stayed quiet. “For the record.” She continued. “Longingly staring after Pressley counts as contact. You’ll never get over him like this, darling. It’s been a year.”

Her tone had taken on a comforting note, the small smile screaming *Pity*. Again.

“I know, I know. You’ve already said that!” I groaned. She was about to disagree with me when I realized: “In my head! You’ve already said it in my head. And I know. And it makes sense. I want to get over him. I am, kind of. But *ay dios mío*, Maeve, look at him! It’s impossible.”

“He is a catch.” Riley agreed thoughtfully, twirling a single black box braid around her finger.

“Thank you!” I swept my hand in her direction for emphasis. “There’s nothing wrong with admitting he’s a... catch.” Riley gave me a wink when I glanced at her. “And admiring what makes him so catchy. From afar.”

Maeve tilted her head, gaze flicking across my face. My tan skin, brown eyes, the curls framing them. “No,” she hummed. “There’s nothing wrong with that. And I love the guy—don’t look at me like that, I do! But look at you. You locked eyes with him once and fell right back in love.”

Again, that sympathetic tone in her voice, pity residing in the brown of her eyes.

“That’s an exaggeration.” My gaze cut to Riley, then Laila, feeling the need to clarify. “She’s exaggerating,” I doubled down.

Riley snickered, “We know, babe.” Raising a suggestive brow, she continued innocently twirling one braid between her fingers. Like she wasn’t insinuating what she was insinuating.

Laila, her voice as airy as always, jumped in. “Guys,” she pleaded. “Paula doesn’t need Henry. She’s got Jack.”

I didn’t mean for my face to do that thing, but I scrunched my nose, furrowed my brow and physically cringed at the mention. I immediately felt bad.

While Maeve and Riley wiggled their eyebrows, I groaned. “Do I?”

“You could!” Riley half-yelled, half-screamed, the way she always talked when she was still busy laughing. “You have that poor man wrapped around your little finger. No need to shake your head, it’s true. If he’s coming tomorrow, you’ll see.”

“Tomorrow?” Maeve asked.

“Michael’s thing, remember?” Translation: A party. It was always a party with Riley. “He invited me, and I know I mentioned that I’m dragging every single one of you with me.”

She threw a pointed look at Laila, who definitely did not want to go, but would most likely end up there regardless. The fact her girlfriend would probably show up was half the reason. Looking back at me, Riley added, “I assume Henry will be there, too.”

I didn’t mean to sit up straighter, but Jack was all but forgotten about when I asked, “You think?” and I realized too late that I had not even tried to be subtle about it.

“Good God,” Maeve sighed, face disappearing behind her hands. “You shouldn’t have said that, Rie.”

I gasped, as if offended by her accurate observation. “I just asked! I don’t care. It’ll be fine.” My eyes twitched into a glare, narrowing at my best friend. “I’ve gone months ignoring him, and I can do a few more before we graduate. Thank you so much for your vote of confidence, though, Maeve.”

Her hands shot up in playful surrender, lips quirking in sync with the motion. “I love you?” she winced. “I’m sure you’ll manage.”

And I thought, *Yes. I could manage.*

Pretending to hate the only man I’d ever loved couldn’t be that hard, and it was kind of comforting to know I’d probably never see him again after this.

The heart-wrenching kind of comfort.

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